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29 November 1973

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: THE OUTLOOK FOR NEGOTIATIONS IN CAMBODIA --
AND A PROPOSAL

MAJOR POINTS

The prospects for negotiations in Cambodia appear bleak at present; the Khmer Communists (KC) are clearly bent on attempting to topple the Phnom Penh government by military means this dry season.

But if the KC appear to be falling short of their goal -- and this might become clear by the end of January or February -- the possibility of negotiations might increase.

Sihanouk might be tempted to try an end-run around the KC to achieve a negotiated settlement.

Paragraphs 8-18 present a proposal whereby the U.S. might work with Sihanouk in attempting to bring about such a development. While there would be no guarantee of success, this approach appears to offer some hope of achieving a negotiated settlement in Cambodia.

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Negotiations: The Present Situation

1. The prospects for an early ceasefire and negotiations in Cambodia are very poor. The Khmer Communists (KC) are moving into their dry season offensive, and they appear determined to make a major effort to topple the Lon Nol government this dry season (December through May) -- primarily by cutting Phnom Penh's major supply arteries. The KC have repeatedly and emphatically rejected any notion of political compromise or negotiations and have turned a deaf ear to their allies' and Sihanouk's counsel on this score.

2. Thus far, no one has succeeded in bringing the KC around to the idea that a negotiated settlement might have some merit. Moscow has little standing with the KC and possesses no real leverage over them. Peking has consistently favored a negotiated settlement involving Sihanouk, but China is not in a position to apply decisive pressure on the KC. Negotiating prospects are also dimmed by Sihanouk's inability to control or even greatly influence KC political and military strategy. In effect, he is a voice in the wilderness. Last month's open squabbling between the Prince and the KC over the wisdom of mounting a major military campaign this dry season coupled with the return to Cambodia of Ieng Sary -- the KC's man in Sihanouk's entourage -- has put an even greater distance between Sihanouk and the KC leaders.

3. Hanoi, which has made the greatest investment in the insurgency and retains the greatest leverage within it, is faced with a dilemma in dealing with KC intransigence. Although North Vietnam has probably cut back its military support to the KC, Hanoi is not likely to attempt to force a settlement by employing the ultimate sanction at its disposal -- the cessation of all logistic support. Even if Hanoi were willing to take such a step, it could not be certain that the move would compel the KC to negotiate. Moreover, Hanoi would have to weigh the possibility the KC might win it all militarily even without North Vietnamese support. In short, Hanoi has reason to proceed cautiously at this time.

Negotiations: Later in the Dry Season

4. The KC's present fixation on a military solution, however, does not totally rule out the possibility of negotiations later in the dry season. If the GKR is able to complete the crucial stockpiling of ammunition, POL, rice and other

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supplies planned for December and January -- and this means keeping the Mekong corridor open during this period -- the KC might begin to lose faith in their ability to topple the Lon Nol government this dry season. In this situation, sentiment could grow within the KC for a change in policy, and the advice and pressure of their allies might carry greater weight.

5. Should the KC decide to explore negotiating possibilities, it would seem to be more in their interest to do so earlier than later, i.e. before the GKR's survival is clearly apparent and at a time when the KC might calculate they could still offer to talk from a strong position of strength. Thus, assuming the KC view the first few months of fighting as critical for accomplishing their objectives, the GKR's ability to hold its own during this period might lead the KC leadership to reassess the advisability of at least testing the negotiating waters as early as late January or February.

6. At this point, the time might be ripe for another effort to negotiate a Laos-style coalition government involving Sihanouk, the KC, and elements of the present Phnom Penh regime. During the past year, a consensus on an appropriate settlement has gradually developed among all three of the KC's principal backers; all appear to favor Sihanouk's return to some position of political power in Cambodia. As long as this consensus persists, such a solution cannot be ruled out, and Sihanouk will remain an important factor in the Khmer political equation.

7. The key to negotiations, however, will continue to be held by the KC, and, for the moment at least, the chances of their shifting from a fight to a talk strategy remains more a hope than a likelihood. SNIE 57-1-73: "The Short-Term Prospect for Cambodia Through the Current Dry Season -- May 1974" (due for USIB review on 5 December) concludes that even if the GKR survives the coming round of military action, its overall position in the countryside vis-a-vis the KC will have deteriorated further. This basic weakness in the GKR position provides the KC a powerful incentive to persist in the struggle and resist pressures for a genuine compromise.

Negotiations: A Possible Gambit

8. A better fix on the variables and unknowns in the situation is likely in a few months -- after the KC have had a chance to try their ability to force a military solution. In the meantime, however, there is a possible gambit that might be tried.

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This would involve an approach to Sihanouk which was in effect an end-run around the KC. The following paragraphs present a proposal whereby the U.S. might involve itself in attempting to bring about such a development.

9. Background. Although the rationales differ, Sihanouk and the U.S. appear to share much the same ultimate goal in Cambodia -- an equitable peace in which Cambodia is a relatively free-standing, not totally Communist-dominated country.

10. There is little doubt that Sihanouk has grown increasingly disillusioned with the KC unwillingness to accept the idea of negotiations as well as their half-hearted, if even that, support of him as leader of the insurgency. These factors, however, have also left Sihanouk in a more independent position than he might otherwise have to maneuver with the other parties involved in Cambodia. Sihanouk realizes that his only real chance of ever regaining some semblance of political power in Cambodia rests on a negotiated solution. His objective is either to bring the KC around to his way of thinking, or else to find a way in which the KC were forced into a box where they had to accept a negotiating package or face isolation and perhaps dissension in their ranks.

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We would emphasize that should the KC take over and dominate Cambodia, Sihanouk and other patriots like him would ultimately find themselves eliminated from power and forced into permanent exile, and the Cambodian people would suffer greatly under KC dominance, ultimately controlled by the Vietnamese.

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13. The U.S. Government, [REDACTED] would propose that Sihanouk unilaterally and publicly call for a ceasefire and peace negotiations between the KC, the RGNU and the GKR. He would include in his proposal that the time had come for Khmers to stop killing Khmers and to sit down and negotiate for the good of the Cambodian people. After Sihanouk had made this public statement, the U.S. Government would immediately and publicly announce support, in concert with appropriate statements from the Chinese, the GKR, and, if possible, Hanoi. The timing as to when the GKR, the Chinese, and the North Vietnamese should be approached would depend on Sihanouk's reaction. In any event, all three would have to give some degree of support to Sihanouk's move -- which admittedly might be difficult to extract. Moscow might also be approached, but this should be done sotto voce to avoid alienating Peking.

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14. We are confident that Sihanouk would recognize such a proposal [REDACTED] as being legitimate and coming from the U.S. The success of the proposal would depend on Sihanouk's desire to reach a settlement, his hope to return to power in Cambodia, and his willingness to accept the risks of a flat KC turndown. If the KC did refuse to negotiate, Sihanouk's action would seriously jeopardize -- perhaps end -- any hope for a future position of power or control within or over the KC and make it impossible for him to come to power on their coattails. This would be the major drawback to Sihanouk's accepting the proposal.

15. But for all of his shortcomings, Sihanouk is basically a politically courageous Cambodian nationalist. The appeal to his personal pride and international stature should be couched in terms of his attempting to salvage his slowly sinking nation. He would be singled out as the only person capable of bringing the fighting to an end. Further, the fact that the U.S. had come over to his side would appeal to his sense of vanity, and more important, it would finally give him the support of all the major powers.

16. If Sihanouk does accept our proposal and an open break with the KC results, the gambit will not have necessarily failed. At that point Sihanouk might have little to lose by following through on the negotiation proposal, in effect presenting the KC with a fait accompli and then calling on his supporters

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within the insurgency to stop fighting. In some ways Sihanouk could become the Souvanna Phouma of Cambodia. The hard-core leadership of the KC would be forced either to go along or continue the insurgency -- but at the loss of much of their international support and without the benefit of Sihanouk's popularity in the villages.

17. In any case, Sihanouk's price would probably be high. He would seek assurances that Lon Nol would not be involved in the negotiations. Sihanouk might also demand that others in the Phnom Penh government also depart, particularly Sirik Matak, Sosthene Fernandez, and Cheng Heng. This could present the U.S. with a difficult, but not insurmountable, problem. Although Lon Nol has stated on several occasions that he would step aside if he were a barrier to negotiations, Washington would have to put the matter squarely to him and his government.

18. In any event, a detailed scenario would have to be approved at the highest level of the U.S. Government to assure minimum risk to future negotiating possibilities. But some risks are inherent in the situation in any event. Sihanouk might refuse or he might hold out for additional concessions. The KC might well refuse to have anything to do with the proposal even if Sihanouk went along. The GKR leaders could not be kept in the dark very long, and their will to persist might simply evaporate in the face of what they might view as evidence that the U.S. was abandoning them. In short, the proposal represents at best a gamble; there would be no guarantee of success. But however slim the chance might be, this approach appears to offer some hope at this time of achieving a negotiated settlement in Cambodia.

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